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Iran Protests Stir International Convergences and Conflicting Interests

Unit for Political Studies

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Unit for Political Studies

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Since December, Iran has witnessed its largest wave of anti-government demonstrations since the 2022 Women, Life, Freedom movement sparked by the death of student Mahsa Amini in police custody after she was arrested for not wearing a hijab. The latest protests, in which thousands of protestors have been killed, began in Tehran's central bazaar in response to an economic crisis fuelled by the collapse of the Iranian rial, which at the time of writing had hit 1.4 million to the dollar.¹ Iranians' socio-economic woes cannot be seen in isolation from the ongoing economic sanctions on the country, the impact of which has been exacerbated by the 12-day US-Israeli war on the Islamic Republic in mid-2025.

This also has further consequences, such as exacerbating the effects of economic mismanagement and increasing the public's reliance on the informal "shadow economy", which circumvents international sanctions but carries with it the seeds of corruption. Regional and international reactions to the protests nearly sparked a new regional military confrontation after US President Donald Trump threatened to intervene in support of the protesters. While Israel had hoped that US military action would bring about regime change in Iran, the Gulf states had taken a more cautious stance; some have firmly opposed military action because of the potentially grave risks to regional security.

The US Position: Regime Change or Regime Subjugation?

Around two weeks into the protests in Iran, President Trump intervened directly in the crisis. In a statement on 13 January, he urged the protestors to keep protesting. In a social media post, he urged them to "TAKE OVER YOUR INSTITUTIONS!!!", promising them that "HELP IS ON ITS WAY" and that "killers and abusers... will pay a big price"² Yet the following day, he said he had received credible reports that the authorities were no longer killing people, and that death sentences issued against 800 individuals had been revoked.³ Despite some reports suggesting that US military chiefs were preparing to launch a strike against Iran on 14 January, Trump ultimately refrained from issuing such an order. He justified his about-turn by citing his "personal conviction", and said that no strikes were imminent, although he did not rule out the possibility of a future attack,⁴ a threat underlined by the continued US military buildup in the region.

However, in light of Trump's contradictory statements, it is difficult to determine whether he has truly abandoned the military option, or merely postponed it until US military preparations are complete. It is more likely that his repeated shifts are part of a calculated strategy aimed at keeping Iran uncertain about his intentions, potentially pushing it to make the concessions he is demanding.⁵

1 "At least 5,000 killed during Iran's nationwide protests, official says", *France 24*, 18/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2F2>

2 Jim Geraghty, "Trump's Sudden Reversal on Iran", *National Review*, 15/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2hB>.

3 Lara Seligman, Alexander Ward, Michael R. Gordon & Benoit Faucon, "How Trump Went From 'Locked and Loaded' to Hitting Pause on Striking Iran", *The Wall Street Journal*, 16/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2Th>.

4 Warren P. Strobel, John Hudson, Isaac Arnsdorf, Susannah George, Gerry Shih & Tara Copp, "In Iran crisis, Trump confronted limits of U.S. Military Power", *The Washington Post*, 17/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2uT>.

5 Abid Hussain, "Trump's bluffs: Why US Strike on Iran Remains Real Threat", *Al Jazeera*, 15/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2wG>.

This suggests that his objective is to influence the behaviour of the Iranian regime rather than seek to topple it, given the significant risks involved in launching such an attack. Washington fears that were the regime to fall, this could give rise to an even more hardline regime or another “failed state” in the Middle East, threatening the stability of a region vital to US interests.

However, none of this precludes the possibility of Trump launching a military operation against Iran at a later stage. Yet even if that were to take place, he would want the strike to be swift and decisive, requiring no ground troops and avoiding a protracted war lasting weeks or months.⁶ The military options presented to him seem to rule out a repeat of the abduction of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro; despite Iran’s weakened defence capabilities following the US-Israeli attack in the summer of 2015, the country is very different from Venezuela. It has greater military capabilities, and would certainly retaliate against any attack, potentially leading to the kind of protracted confrontation to which Trump is unwilling to commit. It is notable in this regard that he halted his strikes against Yemen’s Houthis in 2025 when he realized that the campaign could escalate and mire the American military in an open-ended conflict.

Also among the concerns discussed by US national security officials is possibility that the Iranian regime might become more dangerous in its response to US and allied forces if it believes it is on the verge of collapse.⁷ Iran still possesses a large arsenal of ballistic missiles, despite the damage it sustained in US and Israeli attacks. Trump also has domestic political considerations; prominent figures within the conservative wing that supports him have warned of the risks of becoming embroiled in a new foreign conflict, and the political costs of abandoning the “America First” slogan that Trump himself promoted during his election campaign. It is worth noting that bombing Iranian nuclear sites in June 2025 has already sowed division within Trump’s electoral base.

The Israeli Position: Regime Change at Any Cost

While the Trump administration has warned against getting involved in a confrontation with unpredictable consequences, and is instead attempting use maximum pressure to force Iran to negotiate, Israel appears far more eager to topple the Iranian regime – regardless of the repercussions for regional security and US interests. Israel views Iran as the greatest threat in the region, given the destruction of the military capabilities of Syria and Iraq.⁸ However, having suffered heavy losses in its last war with Iran, this time Israel is trying to distance itself from any leading role, making it seem as though the issue is solely between Trump and Iran. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has instructed his cabinet ministers to refrain from commenting on current events in Iran,⁹ and

⁶ Katherine Doyle, Courtney Kube, Julie Tsirkin & Gordon Lubold, “Trump would want Military Action in Iran to be Swift and Decisive, Sources Say”, *CBC News*, 14/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2R8>.

⁷ Doyle.

⁸ Raphael Ahren, “PM Likens Iran to Nazi Germany in Its ‘Commitment to Murder Jews’”, *Times of Israel*, 3/12/2026, 2017, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2zr>.

⁹ “Ministers Instructed Not to Speak Publicly About Potential External Intervention in Iran – Report”, *The Times of Israel*, 12/1/2026, 2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2ID>.

has limited himself to a brief statement expressing his support for the Iranian protesters¹⁰ and his hope that relations between Israel and Iran can be rebuilt once the latter is “freed from the yoke of tyranny”.¹¹ Notably, the Israeli army has also emphasised that the protests are an internal Iranian matter, while simultaneously affirming that Israel remained on “high alert” and prepared to respond to any direct or indirect threat arising from developments in Iran.¹² Later, Netanyahu began promoting the idea that the Iranian people were taking their destiny into their own hands.¹³ Naturally, none of this negates the systematic and ongoing involvement of Israeli intelligence agencies inside Iran.

A key aspect of the domestic debate in Israel is focused on the possibility of an Iranian attack¹⁴ in response to any American attack on Iran. The Israeli position is also linked to assessments by the military establishment, which believes that the current protests are unlikely to lead to the collapse of the regime.¹⁵ Israeli anxiety has reached such a point that Netanyahu has asked Trump to postpone any American military offensive against the Islamic Republic, in order to buy Israel more time to prepare for any potential such attack¹⁶ – and for the US to complete its preparations to defend Israel. The US military is planning to deploy additional defensive and offensive capabilities to the region in preparation for a potential presidential order to launch a military strike on Iran. This includes the redeployment of the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and its strike group from the South China Sea to the Middle East. More air defence systems, fighter jets, and possibly submarines are also on their way to the region.¹⁷

Netanyahu also understands that any direct or overt Israeli military intervention in Iran during the protests could backfire. Public Israeli support would bolster the regime’s narrative that the protests are the result of foreign interference; any further physical Israeli involvement could politically damage the Iranian opposition,¹⁸ as well as increasing the likelihood of an Iranian attack on Israel.¹⁹ Accordingly, Israel is leaving the US to take the lead should it ultimately decide to launch strikes against Iran,²⁰ and has expressed its willingness to intervene if invited to participate in a military

10 Danny Citrinowicz, “Why Israel Is Responding to Protests in Iran with Caution”, *Atlantic Council*, 16/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2dS>.

11 Melanie Lidman, “As Iran Protests Grow, Israel Watches Closely but Prefers to Remain on Sidelines”, *The Times of Israel*, 12/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2sP>.

12 Lidman.

13 “Old Tactics of Repression Face New Pressures”, *The Guardian*, 9/1/2026, 2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2CI>.

14 “Iran warns that US Troops, Israel will be ‘Legitimate Targets’ if America Intervenes over Protests”, *France 24*, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2Um>.

15 “Report: Israeli Intel Officials Believe Slim Chance Iran Protests Will Bring Down Regime”, *Israel Hayom*, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2WR>.

16 “Israel and Arab Nations Ask Trump to Refrain from Attacking Iran”, *The New York Times*, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2tA>.

17 “Scoop: Mossad Director Visits U.S. for Iran Consultations”, *Axios*, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2cH>.

18 *Iran’s Protests: The Regional and International Responses*, International Institute for Strategic Studies, (January 2026), accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2yK>.

19 Danny Citrinowicz, “Why Israel Is Responding to Protests in Iran with Caution”, *Atlantic Council*, 16/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2dS>.

20 Gerry Shih, Karen DeYoung, Suzan Haidamous & Ari Flanzraich, “With Tensions High, Israel and Iran Secretly Reassured Each Other via Russia”, *The Washington Post*, 14/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2AI>.

operation. Israel also acknowledges that if the Iranian regime does fall, this will most likely be the result of American actions and decisions, not Israeli ones. In this regard, Oded Ailam, head of the Counterterrorism Division of the Mossad (Israel's intelligence and special operations agency), has said: "Israel must be the 'wind' feeding the flames, not the oxygen that allows the regime to define the protest as a foreign invasion".²¹

Israel has proposed other alternatives to be implemented while the Iranian regime weakens further, so that subsequent strikes will be more effective. As well as tighter sanctions,²² these options include cyberattacks targeting command and control centres, which would disrupt communications and coordination between Iran's political, military, and security chiefs.²³ Trump has also pressured Elon Musk, his former advisor on government efficiency and owner of satellite-based web service Starlink, to provide internet access to Iranians, allowing them to subvert the regime's web blackout and the restore the flow of information.

The Gulf States Strive to Prevent War

The Arab Gulf states have remained silent regarding the protests in Iran, although unconfirmed reports suggest that three of them have engaged, through undisclosed diplomatic channels, in efforts aimed at reducing the likelihood of military escalation. Trump has effectively denied this, but if it is true, it suggests that Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Oman have led efforts to pressure the US administration not to launch a military strike against Iran, fearing that it would lead to a wider conflict in the Gulf region and the Middle East.²⁴ The Gulf states appear to have genuine concerns about the risk of chaos and further regional instability, irrespective of whether or not these concerns have been expressed in direct conversations with the US aimed at forestalling any such military action. Qatar and Saudi Arabia have both announced that they would refuse to allow the US to use their airspace for any military operation;²⁵ while Saudi Arabia further confirmed that it will not be a party to any potential conflict, a clear attempt to distance itself from any US military action and avoid the consequences of such an action.²⁶

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, along with Oman and Egypt, have appealed to the US to avoid attacking Iran, for fear of a wider regional conflict.²⁷

21 Yaakov Lappin, "Military official: IDF Is Monitoring Iran Developments", *JNS.org*, 12/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F31f>.

22 Courtney Kube, Katherine Doyle and Keir Simmons, "Israeli and Arab Officials have Privately Suggested U.S. hold off on Iran strikes", *NBC News*, 13/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2kl>.

23 Ibid.

24 "Israel and Arab Nations Ask Trump to Refrain from Attacking Iran", *The New York Times*, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2tA>.

25 Patrick Wintour, "Gulf states and Turkey urged Trump not to launch strikes against Iran", *The Guardian*, January 15, 2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2OT>.

26 Summer Said, "Iran's Gulf Rivals Warn U.S. Against Strike on Tehran", *The Wall Street Journal*, 13/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2AW>.

27 Phillip Nieto, "Netanyahu halts Trump from Bombing Iran as Israel Delivers Vital Intelligence on Regime Crackdown", *The Daily Mail*, 15/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2n7>.

Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier General Aziz Nasirzadeh has warned that any country that provides support for a US military operation against his country would be considered a legitimate target.²⁸ Furthermore, the Gulf states fear that any escalation against Iran could lead to the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, disrupting their oil and gas exports. The vast majority of the Gulf states' oil exports flow through this vital waterway connecting the Gulf to the Indian Ocean. According to estimates by the US Energy Information Administration (EIA), the pipelines built by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to bypass the Strait have only provided them with around 2.6 million barrels per day of extra capacity – just over a third of the estimated 7.1 million barrels per day that transit the Strait daily.²⁹ At the same time, the Gulf Arab states are deeply concerned about the potential repercussions of regime collapse in Iran, which could result in long-term chaos and instability. Should the Iranian regime fall without a viable alternative emerging from within, the most dangerous scenarios for Gulf security include the rise of separatist movements and large-scale movements of refugees.³⁰ The Gulf Arab states also fear that any military attack on Iran would destabilize the whole region and undermine their own status as safe havens for investment and tourism.³¹ From the Gulf states' perspective, the optimal scenario is that the protests in Iran are contained and they avoid becoming embroiled in any external confrontation, while simultaneously pursuing a US-led negotiation process to resolve their differences with the Islamic Republic and achieve regional stability.³²

Conclusion

Given President Trump's conflicting pronouncements, his belief in raw power, and his tendency to trick his adversaries, it is difficult to confirm whether or not he has definitively ruled out a military strike against Iran. However, several factors can be identified that might favour or preclude a military strike, as well as determining the scale of such a strike if it were to occur. First is the question of whether, by threatening an attack, Washington can achieve certain results without actually carrying through on its threats. Secondly, would the benefits of military action outweigh the risks of Iranian retaliation, given Iran's insistence that it will target American interests in the Middle East if attacked? Thirdly, does an organized opposition exist within Iran that would be capable of filling the power vacuum should the regime fall? Trump appears to doubt this, particularly given his scepticism over whether Reza Pahlavi, the son of the late Shah of Iran and an ally of Israel, would be able to lead the country. Fourth is the question of whether Iran is willing to make the concessions the US demands, whether over its nuclear programme or its regional policies. President Trump is clearly seeking to contain the Iranian regime – not to overthrow it and sow chaos.

28 "Iran Warns It May Act before an Attack if It Detects a Threat", *Iran International*, 6/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2lk>.

29 "Amid Regional Conflict, the Strait of Hormuz remains critical oil chokepoint", *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, 16/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2Jl>.

30 "Iran's Protests: The Regional and International Responses", International Institute for Strategic Studies, 16/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2yK>.

31 "Iran Protests Quelled Since Deadly Crackdown, Residents Say", *Reuters*, 16/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F34Z>.

32 "Iran's Gulf Rivals Warn U.S. Against Strike on Tehran", *The Wall Street Journal*, 19/1/2026, accessed on 19/1/2026, at: <https://acr.ps/1L9F2z9>